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Family Relationships, Dialogue, and Philosophy for Children: Words for Contemporary Education¹

Abstract

The paper deals with the importance of words and dialogue in family education. In the first part, some evidence of an action research is presented – shaped in a hermeneutic phenomenological framework and thanks to the Philosophy for Children method and materials. Then some key words are pointed out, meant as formative goals for parents' educational support, so as to highlight the importance of dialogue among generations and, mainly, of the ethical responsibility of parents in education.

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, dialogue, emotions, recognition, responsibility

¹ The paper is the product of both authors' work. However, Giuseppina D'Addelfio is specifically responsible for Paragraphs On the Hermeneutic Phenomenological Paradigm and Adult Education and Key Words for Contemporary Family Education and Maria Vinciguerra for Paragraphs An Action-Research Through Philosophy for Children and Comparing Dialogues.

Introduction

In 1999, Asha Phillips published the book *Saying No: Why It's Important for You and Your Child*, which would soon become a bestseller and thus translated into several languages. Other, similar books were then published in the same vein. This trend seems to have met an increasingly widespread need among contemporary parents: namely, to get answers and handbooks to accomplish the task of *raising a child*; for centuries, this was considered a fairly simple and obvious practice, whereas today the parenting *functions* are perceived as a challenging, demanding, and uncertain undertaking not only in children's adolescence (as it was for previous generations of parents), but starting even in their early childhood. On the other hand, one might investigate the relationship between such a perception and Gauchet's idea of *Child of Desire*, easily transformed into a *Child King* (2004). However, the early discontinuation in the dialogue between generations is a fact – hence the relevance of parents' current, genuine formative need.

Precisely considering this context, the paper presents some aspects of a wider action-research with a specific focus on the formative pathways for parents designed to explore family lived experience and, therefore, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the *essential profiles* of the educative relationships within the family as well as improvement in the communicative competences between generations. The framework of this empirical research and the subsequent theoretical insights on this specific adult education experience – as outlined in Section 1 – is the research paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology. Then, some evidence which emerged thanks to the action-research is reported in Sections 2 and 3. Finally, some key words, meant as formative goals for parents' educational support are highlighted and discussed in Section 4.

On the Hermeneutic Phenomenological Paradigm and Adult Education

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing interest in phenomenology as a powerful research methodology in order to investigate several aspects of human life. Indeed, phenomenology has extended its range to fields such as psychology, psychiatry, sociology, nursing, healthcare, and – significantly – education.

As is well known, phenomenology is a widespread philosophical movement (Spiegelberg, 1971; Moran & Parker, 2015) which started with Edmund Husserl's works. The phenomenological approach can be meant as a specific philosophical and educative approach, also described as a "pedagogy of attention" (Bellingreri, 2011). Actually, all phenomenologists, however different they were and may be, share a style of thinking that implies both a serious consideration of what appears and a commitment to *return to the things themselves*, thereby bringing to the fore its essential profiles. In the Husserlian perspective, this commitment implies, first and foremost, an *epochè* – i.e., a suspension or "bracketing" of our "natural attitude" or habitual adhesion to the world – as well as a reconsideration of what is usually taken for granted (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). This is the reason why phenomenology can also be considered "a way to educate our vision, to define our posture, and to broaden the way we look at the world" (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010, p. 10).

These educational aims particularly fit the scope of adult education, as stressed by several studies. For example, in the third edition of their famous text on the philosophical foundation of adult education, Elias and Merriam (2005) included phenomenology in the humanistic frameworks, insofar as this approach strongly evaluates personal agency, singularity, and dignity. Namely, they recalled Stanage's attempts to use phenomenology "to lead new programs for adult learners, adult educators, and new paradigm for research" (1987, p. 304). Actually, Stanage had provided a view on Husserl's thought as a possible approach involving

systematic investigation of the performative enactments of, and the systematic investigation of, the essential structures of the phenomena constituting adult education of person. These phenomena most specifically are of the deliberative and liberative action of conscientizing and responsible persons whereby they become transformed and empowered with vital motive for living (1987, p. 304).

More recently, in an insightful paper comparing transformative learning theories and continental theories of *Bildung* in adulthood, Brinkmann introduced the Husserlian phenomenology as a *philosophy of human experience*:

focusing on experience, phenomenology takes into account that the phenomena of the life world are prior to their scientific conceptualization and methodization. To describe experience, phenomenological research employs Husserl's genetic analysis of intentionality ... [and] examines the genesis and the constitution of sense or, in other words, the ability of the self (in relation to the world) to experience, perceive, feel, or think something *as something*. (2015, p. 76)

Moreover, in developing his presentation of phenomenology for adult education, Brinkmann has drawn an interesting comparison between Husserl's writing and an "almost forgot book: Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*" (2015, p. 74), insofar as the latter contains a sort of theory of education where the practices of self-care, self-guidance, and self-formation are combined; however, the prominent role of the educational guide is stressed as well.

What has been said so far helps us to understand phenomenology as offering specific and powerful tools – not only epistemological and methodological tools, but ontological and anthropological ones as well – for attentive, respectful, and insightful educational studies, in particular for adults and, therefore, also for parents.

This is particularly the case when hermeneutics is *grafted* onto phenomenology, as in Paul Ricoeur (1986; see Bloundel, 2010), whose approach can be considered a further development of Husserl's teaching in terms of being more focused on the study of lived experience and of how human beings seek to understand and give meaning to the world in which they live. In general, contemporary hermeneutics can be also included in the humanistic orientation of adult education, insofar as the perspective of hermeneutics orbits around the idea of "worldwide construction" – the ongoing development "of understanding of the world, of other, of self, and of understanding itself" (MacKenzie, 1991, p. viii), which is always irreducibly personal (see also: Welton, 1995).

At the same time, phenomenology and hermeneutics focus on the idea of a *life-world* – and each family can be considered such a word. Indeed, phenomenology and hermeneutics allow us to acknowledge that "we live in a world of mutually affecting entities where our actions have an effect on those with whom we come into contact, and conversely, where we are also affected by their actions" (Agrey, 2014, p. 396). Taking this research approach does not only mean studying this mutual effect, but also

includes an enactment of a particular kind of responsibility for oneself as an integral part of the interpretation of other things and people. This allows for the opportunity of self-understanding to change, as one's own interpretations are shown to need revision. (Agrey, 2014, p. 396)

In particular, Ricoeur argued for the necessity of a never-ending elucidation of meanings, meant as interpretation and re-interpretation. Therefore, such a hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm provides a way of inquiring into human experience and meaning-making, since it offers a specific account of the importance of human words as well as the importance of reflecting on them. Moreover, the very nature of such reflexivity implies that the concrete contexts and belongings in which it is always embodied are viewed with a fresh and closer look.

Ricoeur deals with the role of symbolising signification and various uses of language, thereby highlighting the way narrative leads us to the question of personal identity, precisely meant as a narrative identity. Namely, the text is considered as a structured work as well as a world that can mediate self-understanding, insofar as the ultimate goal of reading a text is not understanding it but, indeed, *understanding oneself in front of the text*, in a dialogue with others. Hence, our authentic *self* is the result of the *gift* that comes from interpersonal relationships. Actually, in *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur, 1992) and elsewhere (Suazo, 2000), Ricoeur pinpoints the ethical nature of personhood and its intimate relation to alterity, thus allowing for a consideration of family relationships from a particular pedagogical perspective. In general, this approach highlights the ontologically fundamental role of intersubjectivity in human life, whereby ethical attitudes related in their lines of thought, such as dialogue, empathy, and mutual recognition (Ricoeur, 2004), emerge.

To conclude this section and introduce the presentation of our action-research, it is worth highlighting that on many occasions hermeneutic phenomenology accounts for the tools for research, both empirical and theoretical, in adult education. Used as an alternative to the quantitative approach to educational research, this paradigm indeed provides for a variety of fruitful possibilities (Friesen et al., 2012; Bellingreri, 2016), mainly insofar as it allows us to recognize the richness of the life-world, the human search for meaning, and the importance of *a first-person perspective* as well of the narrative and intersubjective construction of personhood.

An Action-Research Through Philosophy for Children

As mentioned in the introduction, the starting point of our reflections about significant words in contemporary family education is the results of an action-research study carried out as an educational program among groups of schoolchildren and their parents (the former during the school time, the latter only if they wished to participate, mainly at other times). The general aim was to take parents through a consideration

of some key aspects of *family education* in depth and to take their children through a consideration of some key aspects of *family relationships* in depth, thus improving dialogical attitudes.

More precisely, the research was carried out in Palermo, Italy in two elementary schools and one junior high school. Most of it took place at the Jesuit Gonzaga Institute (founded in 1919 and now a member of the Foundation for Jesuit Education). The participants included 312 children (from 6 to 11 years old) and 60 parents, while the research covered a two-year period. The overall results of this study have been published elsewhere (D'Addelfio & Vinciguerra, 2020), so here we will only focus on parenting and its recurrent words.

The method used in the research was derived from *Philosophy for Children (P4C)*, i.e. Matthew Lipman's pedagogical program and curriculum aimed at using philosophy to help children develop their "critical, creative, and caring thinking" with a particular commitment to rigorous philosophical dialogue (Lipman, 1991).

Actually, Lipman wrote *philosophical dialogues* (which he called "novels"), where reasoning, questioning, and conceptual exploration played a key role in the lives of a group of children and their friends, teachers, and parents. As is well-known, P4C curriculum and methodology are explicitly grounded in social constructivist learning theories (Santi & Oliverio, 2013). These theories point to social interaction, and thus, to dialogue as a mechanism for the internalization of new and more complex ways of thinking, reflecting, and speaking. However, the above-mentioned ontological and anthropological presupposition of the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm can be detected as well: the importance of understanding, the powerful role of narrative – that is, of words and dialogue – the prominence of personal lived experience and of others' experience, the responsibility for the common lifeworld, and the commitment to change one's own interpretations when the intersubjective encounters reveal that they need to be revisited.

All these theoretical insights can be detected in both the practice of classroom dialogue and in the different dialogic episodes occurring in the curriculum novels. Many of these stories are set in familiar spaces and

feature dialogues between parents and children and, in our research, we worked on precisely episodes of this type and used the following novels: *The Doll Hospital*, *Elfie*, *Kio & Gus*, and *Pixie*. After reading such novels within their “community of inquiry,” the children and parents would raise questions and examine suggestions for answers. Thus, in our action-research, the use of Lipman’s method and materials was extended to parental education. In fact, the P4C is also used in adult education contexts, where it is also called “Philosophy for Community” and/or is realized as “Philosophy Cafés” – and sometimes precisely for parental education (Rodrigo et al., 2010; Tattarletti, 2014).

Through the P4C method, parents have the opportunity to start a common reflection and questioning within a small group about parenting and to share their educational experiences. In other words, P4C can be considered a powerful educational setting – a genuinely Socratic as well as Deweyan one – providing not only children but also adults with a space to question and to explore the impact that their questioning and dialogue have in their lives (Mendoca & Costa-Carvalho, 2019). This methodology particularly discloses dialogues and, therein, words used as fundamental educational tools. That is why the P4C literature has provided educators with a great number of strategies and tools for maintaining dialogue and questioning, thus fostering reflective thinking in a community of inquiry.

P4C “takes questions seriously and offers multiple points of entry for deconstructing the nature of the question” (Turgeon, 2015, p. 284). Indeed, questions are a central part of thinking and inquiring in a P4C session with children. More specifically, in each session two moments for questions can be detected: first, the community sets the agenda after reading an episode of the philosophical novel; then, the specific key question the entire session will revolve around is chosen. In Lipman’s approach, the first questions are posed by an individual questioner, or better by a couple or a small group of participants; the facilitator will make this clear, writing the name of the participants who formulated the question after it (on a board or flipchart), as to compose the *agenda*. It provides the group with a cognitive map of its own interests and needs (Lipman, 1997). Once all questions have been collected, the community of inquiry

is invited to reflect on them and to identify some possible links, so as to give the participants as many tools as possible to decide together which key questions to select for inquiry. That is, the agenda makes visible the questions and their possible similarity and works as a springboard that prompts the community to formulate further questions.

A P4C session remains open-ended, as it often happens in family life and as always envisaged in the hermeneutic inquiry. In fact, hermeneutics places a greater value on the genuine question than the resulting answers or solutions (Smits, 2001). Here, another educative approach that is crucial for our time can be disclosed.

Comparing Dialogues

We held six inquiry sessions, amounting to three per group of children (15/20 participants each) and three philosophy sessions per group of parents (15/20 participants each). All of the sessions began with a warm-up activity. The parents and children worked with the same materials. At the end of each year, meeting days were organized between parents and children to consider together the work they had done, to view the materials produced by parent groups, and to compare them with those of their children.

For the purpose of the present paper, some examples of dialogues which compared the children's and parents' words are worth noting. For example, when the key question was "What am I supposed to learn?"; the children said "to be autonomous and share with others," while the parents said "to distinguish requests for cuddles from tantrums." Another example may orbit around "Needs and educational needs." In answer to this section, the children said "security, belonging, confirmation, truth" (all supposed to be provided by parents), but the parents said "children need to be understood and to have room to express their emotions." Emotion certainly appears to be a crucial word in parents' account of their role, insofar as the care of emotions is frequently recalled to describe an authentic and genuine educational relationship.

Also, when it came to the significance and importance of the word “truth” in family educational relationships, an interesting aspect emerged: the children said that they were searching for truth through their parents without actually getting it, since the latter do not usually tell them the truth – in their opinion, out of fear of hurting them. For parents, on the other hand, the truth sounds risky insofar as it is meant as subjective and relative.

Finally, the perspectives about the word “rules” is worth noticing. The younger children think that rules are important and necessary; in particular, the 11-year-old children thought that rules “can free us.” However, parents think that rules are important for raising a child, although today setting and enforcing them seems to be very difficult because – to quote their own words – “rules represent a limit to freedom.”

Key Words for Contemporary Family Education

In summary, considering the key words and, therefore, the formative goals that may well be derived from our action-research and the phenomenological analysis of lived experience (Dahlberg, 2006; van Manen, 2007; Dall’Alba, 2010; Sità, 2012) that has emerged from it. To expand on the lifeworld of parents and children, we will discuss these words, by again recalling this paradigm and, in particular, some of its ontological and anthropological insights.

First of all, emotions and affective wellbeing seemed to be the paramount concern of the parents. We have to recognize that this approach, as one may derive from the parents’ words on how to meet their children’s needs, mirrors the “cult of emotion” (Lacroix, 2001) which is typical of our times and which appears from a phenomenological perspective to be a form of “psychologism” (Bruzzone, 2012). With regard to this, we must stress that emotion is to be considered a crucial word in education, insofar as emotion and affective experiences do provide useful information. Therefore, they must be listened to and considered in familial relationships.

However, as highlighted in the phenomenological paradigm, emotions as such are only the surface, since the “structure of human person” – in Edith Stein’s words – is made up of different, interrelated levels: body, soul, and spirit.

In fact, emotions mainly act at the body level, so, for the sake of a real *personal* life, for the sake of education, over-emphasizing emotions should also be revisited in view of the other levels involved. Moreover, in order to avoid any reductive approach to emotions, they should be considered in light of their intentional structure, thereby associating intentional states with specific contents (and they correlate particularly with values and ethical experience; Husserl, 2004; von Hildebrand, 1916, 1922, 1965; Lenoci, 1992; Melle, 2002; Crosby, 2002). In this perspective, the emotional responses can be adequate or inadequate and *desire* is to be understood not as a merely dispositional term, but also and equally as a term for something consciously felt (Montague, 2018) and which can therefore be educated.

The second key word identified in the research is “truth,” which is a need for children but an issue for parents, whose approach again mirrors our times and, in particular, the moral relativism and skepticism that prevails. However, if such skepticism were fully practiced, how should a person be educated? How can one tell them that one thing is better for them than something else, and that another thing is definitely not good for them?

At this stage, therefore, by recalling Ricouer, we might add a third key word – “recognition” – meant in two ways: as a passive need (to be recognized as a person, which includes the acceptance of emotions) and as an active one (to recognize a meaning beyond the subjective, thus engaging in the search for truth). Actually, on closer examination – which a phenomenological approach makes possible – each of us is revealed to be a person always needing *to be recognized* as well as *to recognize* – the former being easily acknowledged today in the need of the care of the affective sphere of our lives, the latter including the human need to have limits and rules and to learn meanings, in order to live as a person in communities with other persons.

To move to our conclusion, a consequence that may be derived from what was stated above is that many contemporary parents need to be guided through the understanding that, in education, emotions are not enough. Specifically, they need to be educated to understand that *being a parent* cannot be meant in terms of functions, but must be conceived of and realized as a personal responsibility.

As a result, the last key word – and, in our perspective, the most important one in family education – is “responsibility,” meant on the one hand as the ethical effort to understand the other’s perspective and needs and to revisit previous ideas and habits in order to change them if necessary, and on the other hand to discern whether and how to ask the other to change, to help them improve. Thus, the profile of a specific responsibility is to welcome, support, and guide. This responsibility can be finally meant as the moral capacity and the choice of parents to answer the twofold need for recognition of their son/daughter and of each son/daughter in their singularity and personal dignity.

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